DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 650 FL 027 213

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TITLE Journal-Writing in University Pleasure-Reading Activities.
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; Creative Writing; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Journal Writing; *Literature Appreciation; Novels; *Reading Writing Relationship; Recreational Reading; Second Language Instruction; Short Stories; *Student Journals; Student Motivation; Thinking Skills; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Story Writing; Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This study used journals and image notebooks to examine English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students' cognitive skill development as they completed pleasure-reading activities that preceded creative writing tasks. Participants were freshmen at Taiwan's National Yang-Ming University who were enrolled in an English reading and writing course. Students completed a short story project in which they chose mystery novels, detective novels, or other novels to read for pleasure. This pleasure-reading activity was designed to facilitate their intrinsic motivation. To put the theory of the writing-reading connection into practice, the researcher observed and analyzed these student writers' journals, image notebooks, and final learning assessments, investigating their cognitive development in reading and writing. Results found that students were successfully empowered to create their own short stories by using the writing skills they learned both in and out of class from extensive reading of mystery or detective stories. (SM)

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Journal-Writing in University Pleasure-Reading Activities.

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Journal-writing in University Pleasure-reading Activities

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The purpose of this study is to examine the uses of journals and image notebooks in fostering EFL university students' cognitive skills through pleasure-reading activities which eventually lead to successful creative writing. The study subjects were freshman students at National Yang-Ming University taking the author's English reading and writing classes. To put the theory of writing-reading connection into practice, the author observed and analyzed these student writers' journals, image notebooks, and the final learning assessments to investigate their cognitive development in both reading and writing. She was thrilled to find that these students were successfully empowered to create their own short stories happily by using the writing skills they have learned both in class and out of class, from extensive reading of mystery or detective stories. From sensation to cognition, it is not that far.

1. INTRODUCTION:

To examine the effect of journal-writing in EFL university pleasure-reading activities and to facilitate learner autonomy, a short story project was designed for freshman students at National Yang Ming University, with the course length of one semester (four months). In this project, students were allowed to choose whatever mysteries, detectives, or novels they liked. This pleasure-reading activity aimed at facilitating student readers' intrinsic motivation; as they became totally absorbed, many learning mechanisms were at work simultaneously.

Fransson (1984) concludes from his experiment that intrinsic motivation comes when the reader is undisturbed by an externally imposed work; it comes when the reader is reading for enjoyment or satisfaction! He found that when the students perceived the situation as threatening (such as in the case of reading for a test), they would pay more attention to detail than to the main idea, connections, or the general sense and value of the text. Conversely, when students were reading for enjoyment, higher levels of understanding occur naturally.

As Goodman (1982) calls it, reading is a "psycholinguistic guessing game," in which readers actively construct the meaning of the text based on minimum textual information and the activation of his or her prior knowledge. In this project, students were told to make contextual guessing about a new word or about what was going to happen next. This active construction of meaning can be found from students'

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journals in this project, in which a great deal of guesses and predictions is found.

2. METHODS:

2A. Procedures:

In-class and out-of-class reading and writing trainings were designed to empower students to create their short stories successfully. The in-class training includes reading skills for making predictions and inferences, as well as writing skills for descriptive, narrative, and scientific writing, while out-of-class training consists of the reading of mysteries or detectives, or longer novels of students' choice. Besides, students kept English journals to practice summary, inference, and prediction-making skills, and they also kept image notebooks to practice descriptive skills by using the five senses. Students recorded the color terms they read in the stories to get a feel for the connotations of colors and how the authors describe various people or scenes by the use of them. The in-class writing practice covers topics like students' personal experiences—their childhood events, their mothers or fathers, cultural themes like Chinese superstitions (plus the reading of western superstitions), and scientific reports.

In the writing lessons, students have learned the following writing skills:

1. beginnings of stories;
2. writing about an unforgettable story from different perspectives as narrators of different ages;
3. creating a character's background, place, and setting
4. keeping a journal
5. keeping an image notebook;
6. building up declarative knowledge (i.e., purpose, audience awareness, and text structure);
7. conducting peer conferences, and publishing the written products in class and on the website—all these are designed to enhance students' declarative knowledge;
8. building up procedural knowledge (i.e., steps in the writing process)
9. communicating in science

The purposes of keeping a journal are to actively engage students in their learning of reading and writing at the same time by having them reflect on what they have read in the stories and what they have observed about how the writer has successfully reached his or her goal in communicating to the readers. Once students are

enlightened about this skill, it's so much easier for them to write better.

2B. Audience Awareness:

Another purpose is for the student writers to develop a sense of audience through their keeping of the journal in which they were the audience of written stories; the interaction among the writer, the student reader, and the text has provided the student readers a good sense of audience awareness. In so doing, students realized that when they created their own stories, they were not just writing for the teacher; they were also writing for the unknown audience as well. "How would the audience react to my story?" was the question they always had to bear in mind when they wrote.

2C. Peer Reviews and Student-teacher Conferences:

Through writer-reader interaction in peer conferences, the student writers were able to understand what the intended audience thought about their stories, and might then revise, delete something redundant, or add something more interesting to catch the audience's attention, to satisfy the audience's curiosity, or to make the audience even more curious about what was going to happen next. They thought this was so "fun" to learn! When they knew how the readers reacted to their writing, their confidence was being built up gradually, and in a very positive way.

The one-to-one student-teacher conferences also worked well. Students felt the individualized attention from the teacher and both sides can talk about the writing product face to face, as a kind of direct interaction between the writer and the reader. Instead of correcting word- or sentence-level mistakes, the teacher asked questions to lead the student in thinking critically about what he or she has written. In other words, guidance is provided in the form of questions, rather than direct correction of surface-level mistakes.

After finishing writing the story, students brought their work to have it read by the teacher and classmates, and feedback was elicited for revision. The students were thrilled to receive very positive and encouraging feedback from the readers, their peers. It served as a great momentum to drive them to do the final polishing energetically and happily. Peer readers reported visualizing the work as they read along. When reviewing their peers' works, the student reviewers were also reading critically. Hence, peer participation has its significance and effects in both the processes of writing and reading. It served as a form of reading from the intended reader's point of view; it also provided instant feedback most helpful to the student writer. It successfully built up audience awareness.

3. RESULTS:

What follows is a close examination of students' journals and image notebooks.

3A. Excerpts from Students' Journals:

3Ai. I read an English tale today. The tale is "The Elephant Man." I will keep writing about this story in my journal and point out the color terms used by the author. Here is a sentence from the story: "Then he took the cigarette out of his mouth and smiled with his *yellow* teeth." The color yellow expresses the result of smoking cigarettes. It is quite necessary to use this color in this context. Smiling with yellow teeth is certainly not a pleasant sight to see. It gives the readers a disgusting feeling.

3Aii. "At the window, next to Emil, a gentleman with a *black* hat was reading a newspaper." In our common sense, a stranger in a novel or movie usually wears something black which creates a mysterious feeling. According to the topic of Chapter 2, I predict that a thief would steal Emil's money later on.

3Aiii. I have been reading many novels recently. One of them is Charles Dickens's "Hard Timer." It makes me laugh; it makes me cry; it astonishes me; and it fascinates me. The characteristic traits of a Dickensian novel are all there: vivid descriptions of characters in all their idiosyncrasies; witty and humorous delivery of factor; richness of emotion and sentimentality. All these coupled with condensation of the story to make it shorter and more compact than his usual novels. I should say that I miss the lengthiness and explicitness of these other novels and classics, such as "David Copperfield" or "A Tale of Two Cities," yet this does not reduce my enjoyment of this masterpiece. Though I must admit that following some of Dickens' more "stretched" sentences still presents a bit of a difficulty for me, often rendering it necessary to reread a sentence over again. All in all, I had a great time!

3Aiv. I've been reading a good deal this past month. Right now I'm reading the novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin." But I've only just begun and haven't quite gotten into the exciting parts. So I'll relate to you about another novel I read – "Catcher in the Rye" written by J. P. Salinger. The story follows the misadventures of a 17-year-old high schooler after his expulsion from school. Our protagonist is an immature boy who likes to fool around by making-believe, a cynic, and a misanthrope who seems to hate all establishments and almost everybody, a low-achiever in school who repeatedly flunks every subject except -- English! (Such above-level literary skills in the protagonist can also be found

in "Little Women," "Anne of Green Gables," "Daddy Long Legs," and "Emily of Newmoon." **Authors like to show parts of themselves through their characters**.) Despite these shortcomings (?), we the readers still cannot prevent ourselves from liking him, for beneath this mask, their outer shell of nastiness, there lies a heart of gold, a passion, a caring and a supreme concern for mankind that manifests itself at once so clearly, and yet also so very obscurely. The ambivalence and paradox of a youngster's heart and soul is captured beautifully in the classics. Perhaps I'm reading too much into this novel. What is there to prove that the protagonist really does live up to my claim? I think the ultimate proof is in his love for his little sister, and his attachment to his dead brother. I was moved to tears when reading about them, even though the protagonist himself isn't that sentimental. In conclusion, I must end by noting that this novel was a "hit" among the youngsters' of the day, and I can wholeheartedly understand this, for it, too, struck a chord in me, leaving a resonance in my heart that will prevail long after the book has been returned.

3Av. I've read about half of the book, "The Secret Garden." I'm aware of several pieces of information. Mary, whose father was a British official sent to India, made good progress in her personality. What was the motivation? What turned a little barbarian into a lovely, considerate little princess? It couldn't be her parents because they were too busy to pay attention to her. Things changed in her uncle's in Yorkshire.

3Avi. Although the mid-term exam is around the corner, I still decided to continue to read for my short story project. I chose another book published by the Oxford University Press. Its title is "The Elephant Man." Tim Vicary wrote this touching story. How come I selected this book? Because it seems to describe how a special patient is led to the open world. I suppose it's also about a doctor's work, and I may have to know the work more or less since I'm a medical student.

3Avii. Dr. Treves helped Joseph to be observed in the hospital. Not only did Joseph read lots of books but he also made a number of friends, including Queen Alexander. Although some new intern nurses got frightened at the first sight of the man, they got to know that he was a nice patient.

3B. Excerpts from Students' Image Notebooks:

3Bi. According to the weather forecast, there is a typhoon approaching Taiwan, so it rained today. The drizzles started to fall from the sky, with the wind and water falling on my face and hair. The rain soon cooled the air, cooled my feeling, and cooled my heart. It looked silent when the drizzles came. It was a sad

evening.

3Bii. The wind of the typhoon sounded scary. It blew hard. When it went through the trees, the trees waved and cried. The leaves fell down like tears falling.

3Biii. Today I listened to Rachmaninov's 'Fantaisie-tableaux.' It has four movements. The first movement showed an exciting rhythm that made me dance. The second movement sounded like night with silence. The third expressed some sad feeling making me moved. The fourth gave me some passion again, just like a new life.

3Biv. In the western art history class today, I was impressed with a fantastic sculpture named "Nike," which means "the statue of victory." The statue presents a strong image of insistence by the pose against the storm. The statue's head is gone, but we can still feel the persistence and pride expressed by her wet clothes and wings stretched upward. It makes me feel that she wants to overcome the tough situation and fly high to get freedom. It really gives me a vivid image of victory.

3Bv. In the infinite universe, there is a beautiful blue planet. The clouds and steam make up the atmosphere, like a cord to protect us. Maybe it is because the earth is blue, an endless blue sky can always make passengers feel like being loved.

3Bvi. Standing on the hill of Yang Ming University, I watched the lights of Taipei City. All lights were separated, shining but lonely. I took off my glasses, suddenly the lights turned into a warm ray – making me feel like I am home.

3C. Summary of Students' Feedback on Keeping English Journals and Image Notebooks:

Most important of all, this type of learning has "opened their eyes," as one student has reflected in her journal. Now they were able to see what they couldn't see before, both in reading and in the actual world, and this ability is a great help in making them better writers. Through constant practice, it gives them the "feel" for what it is like to "write in English." It eases their tension and gives them more confidence and makes them more competent in both reading and writing. Now they can read and write in a much easier and faster way. Extensive reading definitely helps them to "think" in English and enables them to write up their thoughts and feelings in English naturally. That's how the magic of cognition starts to take place.

These student writers realize that they cannot just "tell" something; instead, they should "show" it to the readers by using their five senses to make the descriptions "real." They have learned to enjoy observing people or things around them in great details and then use them in their creative writing of stories. They now feel they can describe what they see much more easily, vividly, and lively. When they cannot write about what they think, they will try another way.

Several students have mentioned in their journals that they would pay attention to how the writer begins the story so that when it was their turn to create stories, they would be able to write an interesting beginning to catch readers' attention and motivate them to read on. They also paid attention to the way writers expressed their characters' feelings, thoughts, or the atmosphere of the story.

3D. Students' Reflections on Their Processes of Creating Short Stories:

To understand the writing processes, two questions were asked as to how they came up with the idea for the story, and how they created their own story.

Student A:

I got the idea from a movie, in which a group of people was trapped in a snowy valley, but finally some of them survived by eating dead people's flesh.

I designed the plot first, then wrote down the outline, and finally completed my entire creation. After finishing my work, I designed the cover by getting a picture from the Internet.

Student B:

The idea came from an old series of English novels called "Dr. Who." In the story there was a species of aliens called the cybermen who have long ago replaced their organic body parts with synthetic ones. They are cold and ruthless.

To create my own story, first I went over the kinds of story I could write – fantasies, sci-fi, knights and dragons, etc. After picking out a specific theme in the sci-fi genre, I then proceeded to lay out the major scenes. This done, I started typing my story on the computer. I added details, edited, deleted, adjusted scenes, and inserted new thoughts along the way. I paid attention to the title and to the special futuristic terminology. I finished off with a little polishing of the draft.

Student C:

E. B. White's "Stuart Little" gave me the inspiration for my short story, "Heroine Alice." I always love adventures. As for the reason why I chose a dog to be the main character, it was because of my love for my dead pet dog, Boggy. She died last March, and I miss her very, very much. In addition, I think personification of animals may add loveliness to my short story, a story of adventure.

I made Boggy the main character in my story. After several days of writing, I asked my sister Betty to read my draft, and she gave me some advice. Then I followed some of the suggestions from my teacher Sheryl and my roommate Calin, etc. to complete the story.

Student D:

My sister and I like stuffed animals. We love every one of them in our home. We named them, and we gave each of them different characters. We like them so much that we regard them as real people just wearing clothes of animals. In my story, the main character is a Persian cat named Po-Po. I imagined what would happen if she ...

I reread many stories that I had read in my childhood. Then I spent two weeks thinking of the plot of my story. That was how I created my own story.

4. DISCUSSION:

The whole study is centered on the idea of the writing-reading connection and the interaction among the writer, reader, and the text. Audience awareness is alerted in the early stage of both reading and writing. Every step in the procedure echoes to the "reader-based" concept.

4A. Rationale for Using Mysteries and Detectives for Reading:

First, these types of stories are "fun," and students can easily buy their favorite ones in bookstores. They enjoyed this freedom of book choice! Psychologists have found that when learners learn happily they learn so much better than in unhappy environments. In addition, students can comprehend these types of stories easily because, compared with long novels, this genre has relatively short-length contents and the structures are formulaic.

Much research has been done on the differences between expository and narrative texts. The conventionalized macrostructures associated with story grammar seem to facilitate comprehension by allowing readers to quickly construct a model of the text, and simpler story grammars are easier to follow than more complex

ones, or the ones that violate expectations. Less proficient students can understand the stories and meanwhile imitate the style without any difficulty. Proficient student readers, on the other hand, responded that they personally preferred long novels, but they still found portrays of the characters' psychological aspects in mysteries and detectives to be useful because they could imitate and use these descriptive skills in their own creations.

Imitative learning has played an important role in this project. Krashen has argued that second language acquisition occurs only when input becomes intake, in which internal mechanisms are working in the learner's mind. When the student writers in this project use the skills they learned from reading stories written by other writers, the input has obviously been transformed into "intake."

Proficient readers are able to detect many useful skills from reading, including the structure of stories. Students in this project found that the structures of mysteries and detectives are formulaic and that they could follow those structures in their creations. In his study of second-language readers, Perkins (1987) has suggested that the ability to sense the conventional structure of stories is similar to the Schematic Concept Formation in the mind. Alderson (2000) has also claimed that good readers are probably characterized by the Schematic Concept Formation, rather than by the schemata or even the ability to activate them. Therefore, one can conclude that the student readers in this project have become good readers because at least now they are able to tell whether the structures are formulaic.

Secondly, students also have found that this type of reading helps them in producing logical organization of stories. Therefore, besides descriptive skills and the knowledge of how to insert conversations into their creations, students have also learned to organize their stories in a logical way, bearing in mind readers' interests.

Thirdly, in this study students are exposed to large amounts of authentic written language: everyday situations in which real language (i.e. dialogs, commonly used expressions—phrases, idioms, and slang) is used, cultural context provided in the mysteries, and suspense that keeps the students read and think! The content makes them think; they would try to solve the problem in the story, as some of the students have reflected in their journals. This justifies Alderson's argument that "much of reading is a general cognitive, problem-solving ability, which underlies all language processing, including listening, and is not specific to reading" (2000).

Fourthly, the comparison conducted by Smagorinsky (1991) has shown that students can write better when declarative knowledge of form plus procedural knowledge are taught than declarative knowledge of form is taught alone. The students' creations in this project are full of evidence that they have learned to write much better when both declarative and procedural knowledge were taught.

Furthermore, as Anne Bernays (1995) has claimed, "Good writers know how to do two very different things equally well – write like a writer and think like one." To write like a writer, students have learned about the writing skills, including when to use dialogs and when to summarize discourse, but what's more complex is to think like a writer. Therefore, they were told to keep a daily reading journal and an image notebook to learn to use their five senses in their descriptions, like what a successful writer usually does – describing people or things by using five senses to make the readers feel "real."

The most exciting finding is that one student integrated Chinese superstitions which she has written about during the semester into her creation. The superstition she used was "if we point to the moon with our fingers, our ears will be cut by the goddess of moon." Engaging culture in creative writing has certainly added the story's flavor.

Other excitements are that many students integrated the personal experiences they have written about during the semester into their creations, and that they used detailed personality traits of the people around them, as well as things they did in the past or do currently. They all felt good about being able to use these materials in their creative writing.

4B. Implications Derived from Students' Writing of Journals and Image Notebooks:

Besides reading, students have also successfully developed audience awareness through their writing of journals and image notebooks. For example, along with their development of reading ability, they have also learned the elements that make the story interesting. During the reading processes, they made predictions, guesses, inferences, and asked questions, and then in their journals they summarized the story and wrote down their thoughts about these predictions, inferences, and questions, as can be seen from the excerpts of journals and image notebooks in Section 3. It's exciting to see that these learners were not just reading and writing; they were actually thinking all the time! The concept of "reader-based writing" has been deeply rooted in their minds.

Another thing taking place when students were absorbed in a mystery, or a novel, was that they were actually "visualizing" (Denis, 1982) the setting of the story unconsciously, what they have visualized then contributed to their comprehension of what they were reading. In fact, in their feedback to their peer writers, students did report of this visualizing experience as they read the creations of their peers. The

student writers were delighted about this kind of feedback because it meant their descriptions were like real!

Improvements in writing soon appeared, as can be detected in consecutive days of students' reading journals and image notebooks. Like other skills being learned, when the writing skills are practiced more, "the skills undergo dramatic changes, including great reductions in its cognitive involvement" (Anderson 1995). They became more of a "natural ability" as the brain can memorize the skills much better after constant practice. Memory is a process, not a fixed thing or a singular skill (Jensen, 1998). Memory formation does not involve just one single location in the brain. Information retrieval often depends on which pathway we access in the brain net. Initially declarative memory plays a significant role but is then replaced by a procedural memory (memory developed through repeated actions), which is vital to skill acquisition. After the cognitive skills are fully acquired, they become abilities similar to "motors," simply without any cognitive involvement. In other words, the brain has become efficient in doing this, so no more cognition is involved in performing the skill. Therefore, someday when the student writers have enough practice and finally arrive at this stage, writing will become a piece of cake for them because by then they will be just writing stories "automatically!"

For the author, the greatest joy would be to see her students becoming competent and even excellent in writing because it is such a complicated type of learning closely connected to reading, writer's creativity, the brain and memory, among other factors. Exploring the cognition of writing skills through pleasure-reading activities is fascinating. Who wouldn't love to write if the readers' comments are always so encouraging, as the student writers received for their creative writing in this project?

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